

Tilburg University

Establishing language skills in Europe

Broeder, P.; Fu, G.

Published in:
Cross-Cultural Communication

Publication date:
2009

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Broeder, P., & Fu, G. (2009). Establishing language skills in Europe: The inspirations on Chinese foreign language study. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 5(4), 32-42.

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Establishing language skills in Europe: The Inspirations on Chinese Foreign Language Study¹

LE DEVELOPPEMENT DES COMPETENCES LINGUISTIQUES EN EUROPE:

LES INSPIRATIONS DES EXPERIENCES CHINOISES DANS L'ETUDE DE LANGUE ETRANGERE

Peter Broeder²

FU Gui-fang³

Abstract: In order to promote transparency and coherence for language learning, teaching and especially estimate, Council of Europe(CoE) developed the Common European Framework of Reference(CEFR) and European Language Portfolio(ELP).The CEFR and the ELP are one of the most influential documents of the last decade in the fields of language learning and teaching in Europe and elsewhere. It is therefore also very important for the contacts between Europe and China, in educational contact as well as in professional contexts.

Key words: Europe; language Skill; The Common European Framework of Reference; European Language Portfolio

Résumé: Afin de promouvoir la transparence et la cohérence pour l'apprentissage, l'enseignement et l'évaluation des langues, le Conseil de l'Europe (CoE) a élaboré le Cadre européen commun de référence (CECR) et le Portfolio européen des langues (PEL). Le CECR et le PEL sont l'un des documents les plus influents de la dernière décennie dans les domaines de l'apprentissage et de l'enseignement des langues en Europe et ailleurs. Il est donc ainsi très important pour les contacts entre l'Europe et la Chine, non seulement dans le contexte pédagogique, mais aussi dans des contextes professionnels.

Mots-clés : Europe; compétences linguistiques; Cadre européen commun de référence; Portfolio européen des langues

¹ The Project Sponsored by the Scientific Research Foundation for the Returned Overseas Chinese Scholars, State Education Ministry.Code:396-Z1310058

² The Department of Communication, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands. China.

³ The Department of Applied Psychology, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, 510006 China.

* Received 22 March 2009; accepted 6 July 2009

1. INTRODUCTION

At least more than 440 languages are used in Europe (Valeur 2007). Europeans often speak languages other than their mother tongue at home, at school, or at work. Language learning not only occurs at school. Therefore, it is important to have a good insight into the way in which people use languages, within a European context. Moreover, it is important to know what levels of language skills are achieved when people learn languages in formal as well as in informal contexts. In order to get grip on the new language (learning) situation, two instruments were developed by the Council of Europe (CoE):

- A *Common European Framework of Reference* introducing a new Descriptive Scheme for language education and a system of Common Reference Levels. This language scale can be used to compare language skills and certificates.
- A *European Language Portfolio*: a comprehensive document that not only covers formal certificates but can also document other language experiences, such as growing up in a multilingual home situation.

2. THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES (CEFR)

The CEFR was officially published in 2001 (CoE, 2001), the European Year of Languages. It quickly turned to be one of the most influential publications of the last decade in the fields of (1) language learning, (2) language teaching and, especially (3) language testing in Europe and elsewhere. The aim of the construction of the CEFR was to promote transparency and coherence for the three areas in a comprehensive way. It consists of two parts:

- The *Descriptive Scheme* is a tool for reflecting on what is involved not only in language use, but also in language learning and teaching. Parameters in the Descriptive scheme include: skills, competences, strategies, activities, domains and conditions and constraints that determine language use;
- The *Common Reference Level system* consist of scales of illustrative descriptors that provide global and detailed specifications of language proficiency levels for the different parameters of the Descriptive Scheme. The core of the Common Reference Level scales is a compendium of 'can-do' descriptors of language proficiency outcomes.

Through the CEFR learners, teachers, examiners, administrators, policy makers, educational institutions are stimulated to refer their efforts to a common European framework. The scales of illustrative descriptors can be used in the support of self-directed language learning (e.g., raising self-awareness of own language skills and strategic actions to be taken by the learner). The CEFR might also be used in the planning of language learning programs (e.g., for establishing interfaces between different sectors of education, for developing curriculum guidelines and textbooks or for teacher training). In order to facilitate co-operation between educational institutions in Europe and to provide a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications the CEFR can be used in the planning of content syllabus of examinations and the specification of assessment criteria. It is also meant to be used in policy making as a means of ensuring coherence and transparency through the different sectors or stages in language education. Many European countries have used the opportunity of the appearance of the CEFR to stimulate curriculum and examination reforms in different educational sectors.

2.1 The Descriptive Scheme of the CEFR

The CEFR adopts an action-oriented approach towards language use, embracing language learning. The Descriptive Scheme focuses on the actions performed by persons who as individuals and as social agents develop a range of *general* and *communicative language competences*.

General competences of a language user/learner comprises four sub-categories:

- *Declarative knowledge* resulting from experience (i.e. empirical knowledge) or formal learning (i.e. academic knowledge);
- *Skills and know-how* implying the ability to carry out tasks and apply procedures;
- *Existential competence* comprising individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes towards oneself and others engaged in social interaction;
- *Ability to learn* is the ability to engage in new experiences and to integrate new knowledge into existing knowledge.

Communicative language competences of a user/learner involve knowledge, skills and know-how for each of the following three components:

- *Linguistic competence* deals with formal characteristics of a language such as the phonology, the morphology, the lexicon and the syntax;
- *Sociolinguistic competence* concerns the socio-cultural conditions of language use such as e.g. politeness rules or social group repertoires;
- *Pragmatic competence* covers the functional use of language, for example the use in specific scenarios of how to act in a restaurant or how to participate in a job interview.

On the basis of general and communicative language competences the language user/learner applies skills and strategies that are suitable to perform tasks in the following oral/written language activities:

- *Reception*
- *Production*
- *Interaction*
- *Mediation* (i.e. summarizing, paraphrasing, interpreting or translating)

The contextualization of these language activities in specific domains implies activating language processes of producing and receiving spoken/written discourse (so-called texts). The language activities happen within domains of language use such as:

- *Public domain*
- *Personal domain*
- *Educational domain*
- *Occupational domain*

Performing language activities the language user/learner needs to activate those strategies that seem most appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be accomplished in the pertinent domain. Ultimately the

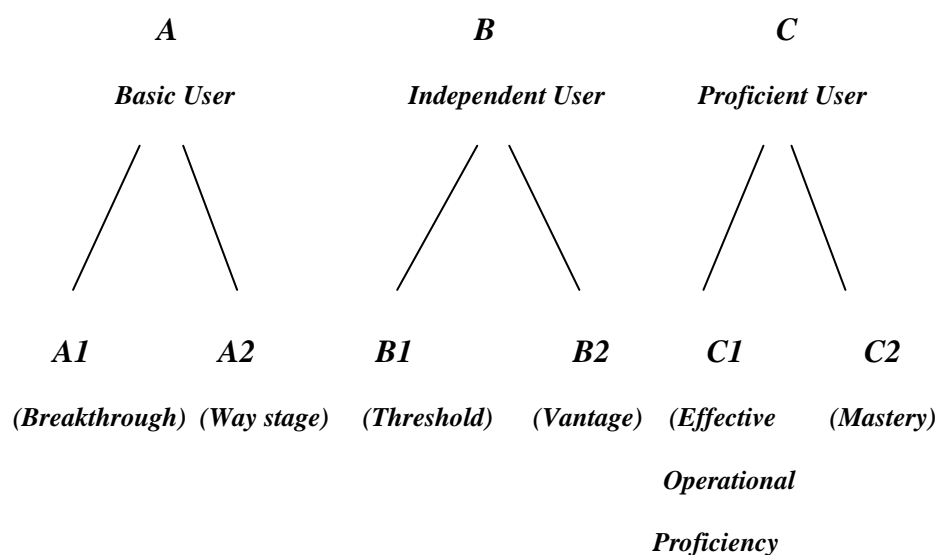
(self-)monitoring of the process of language use and language learning results in the reinforcement or modifications of competences.

2.2 Common Reference Levels of language proficiency

With a view to enhancing the usability of the CEFR a simple and global distinction is made into three main user levels:

- The *proficient user* has hardly any or no strains in the use of the target language – no consideration needs to be taken into account that it is not his/her native tongue;
- The *independent user* can handle the daily language practice, is mostly able to interact without too much effort and generally is able to follow a normal speech tempo – some consideration needs to be taken into account that it is not his/her native tongue;
- The *basic user* has the most elementary expressions, however in communication is dependent of the willingness on the interlocutor to adapt to the attained level – interlocutors assistance is necessary.

A ‘hypertext’ branching approach (see below) was proposed to define finer levels and categories to suit local needs and yet still relate back to a common system. The number of six levels was determined in order to be adequate to show progression in different sectors, whilst allowing for reasonably consistent distinctions to be made.



The six ascending proficiency levels are couched in terms of “can-do” statements, which fit into the different parameters of the Descriptive Scheme. Table 1 gives the specification of the global scale for the Common Reference Levels.

Table 1: Common Reference Levels: global scale

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

The global scale for the Common Reference Levels is elaborated further through ‘can-do’ descriptors for understanding, speaking and writing, that is, for each of the following six language activities in the Descriptive Scheme:

- Listening;
- Reading;
- Spoken Interaction;
- Spoken Production;
- Writing.

Cross-tabulating these six language activities with the six proficiency levels results in a self-assessment grid with general descriptors of outcomes (see Appendix 1). For example, the general descriptor for listening comprehension on *Breakthrough Level* (or level A1) is formulated as follows:

I can recognize familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family, and my immediate concrete surroundings, when people speak slowly and clearly.

Below is an example of the general descriptor used for reading comprehension on *Mastery Level* (or level C2):

I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialized articles, and literary works.

With the aid of general descriptors such as these, anyone, the teacher, the curriculum developer, but also the employer, the personnel officer, or the policy maker can easily attain information on an individual’s language proficiency. In terms of European and international affairs, this assessment of language proficiency levels may have great relevance.

The global Reference Scales are elaborated further through specific descriptors that provide detailed information and insight. Some examples of specific descriptors for listening comprehension skill of the *basic breakthrough* language user/learner (or level A1) are the following:

*I can understand simple directions for how to get from X to Y, on foot or by public transport.
I can understand numbers, prices, and times.*

The detailed specification of the Descriptive Scheme through the illustrative Reference Scales take the form of a descriptor bank that can be added to, updated and edited to meet present and future needs. Since 2001 the CEFR with its Descriptive Scheme and the Common Reference Levels have been translated into most of the European languages.

Table 2: Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid

Table 2-a:

		A1	A2	B1
U N D E R S T	Listening	I can recognise familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.
A N D I N G	Reading	I can understand familiar names, words and very simple sentences, for example on notices and posters or in catalogues.	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters.
S P E A	Spoken Interaction	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).
K I N G	Spoken Production	I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.

Table 2-b:

		B2	C1	C2
W R I T I N G	Writing	I can write a short, simple postcard, for example sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate needs. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.
U N D E R S T A N D I N G	Listening	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signaled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided. I have some time to get familiar with the accent.
	Reading	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.	I can read with ease virtually all forms of the written language, including abstract, structurally or linguistically complex texts such as manuals, specialised articles and literary works.
S P E A K I N G	Spoken Interaction	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.	I can express myself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. I can use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate my contribution skilfully to those of other speakers.	I can take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms. I can express myself fluently and convey finer shades of meaning precisely. If I do have a problem I can backtrack and restructure around the difficulty so smoothly that other people are hardly aware of it.
	Spoken Production	I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.	I can present a clear, smoothly-flowing description or argument in a style appropriate to the context and with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.
W R I T I N G	Writing	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select style appropriate to the reader in mind.	I can write clear, smoothly-flowing text in an appropriate style. I can write complex letters, reports or articles which present a case with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points. I can write summaries and reviews of professional or literary works.

3. THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO (ELP)

The most successful implementation of the approach proposed in the CEFR is the European Language Portfolio (henceforth: ELP) – the second instrument developed by the Council of Europe (CoE, 2000). It is a document, in which those who are learning or have learned a language – whether at school or outside school – can record and reflect on their plurilingual and pluricultural experiences. It was launched by the Council of Europe (CoE) during the European Year of Languages (2001) as a tool to support the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism – the two fundamental ideas underlying the CoE language education approach. These two concepts are based on the observation that individual language learners/users may develop their linguistic and cultural ability in a range of languages and cultures, with a very diversified levels of proficiency (a ‘profile’) for the different skills within that repertoire. The ELP is a tool with which the CoE is attempting to stress the value of each new linguistic and cultural experience thus striving to preserve a linguistically and culturally diversified Europe – an ideal of ‘plurilingual and pluricultural people living in a multilingual and multicultural Europe’. In the interest of the quality and credibility of the ELP the Education Committee of the Council of Europe has adopted *Principles and Guidelines* (CoE, 2004). With respect to the form and the content the recommendation is that each version of the ELP includes the following three components:

- *Language Passport*: This section is a regularly updated summary description of the linguistic and intercultural experiences of the owner, it provides “an overview of the individual’s proficiency in different languages at a given point in time; the overview is defined in terms of skills and the common reference levels in the Common European Framework” (CoE, 2004: 5);
- *Language Biography*: the second section of the ELP “facilitates the learner’s involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress” (CoE, 2004: 7). It contains goal-setting and self-assessment checklists expanding on the ‘can-do’ descriptors in the CEFR;
- *Dossier*: this section “offers the learner the opportunity to select materials to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Biography or Passport” (CoE, 2004: 8). The Dossier is a combination of personal documents consisting of, for example, certified documents showing the results the language user/learner has achieved in the course of his/her studies, the studies he/she made during a student exchange programme, if attended; and documents that present samples of language use originating from projects and presentations the user has participated in.

It is to be underlined that the ELP has two basic functions:

- The *pedagogic function* is to guide and support the user in the process of language learning. The focus is on development of learner autonomy in the process of life-long learning, on raising intercultural awareness, and on encouraging reflective learning;
- The *reporting function* of the ELP is to record proficiency in languages. The ELP user documents his/her own plurilingual background and intercultural experiences. Concrete evidence is provided of all languages that have been learnt at school or outside school, and an overview of official diplomas (such as exam documents, language course certificates).
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Since the introduction in 2001 over 1.250.000 learners worked with an ELP. In 36 out of 46 CoE member states ELP’s are in one way or another developed, piloted or implemented with country-specific characteristics (cf. Schärer 2004). Developers can submit their language portfolios to an ELP Validation Committee that verifies the conformity of portfolio models with the *Principles and Guidelines* (CoE, 2004). A large number of different ELP models (on-line versions included) have been validated and put into use in the CoE member states.

4. THE INSPIRATIONS OF CEFR AND ELP ON CHINESE FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY

The CEFR is meant to be a transparent, flexible, and open instrument directed towards different forms of language use and language learning in formal or informal contexts. The CEFR can provide a basis for the acknowledgement of the language qualifications that are used in the different European countries. In addition to Council of Europe (CoE) actions, the European Union (EU) recommends the Common Reference Levels as an appropriate basis for schemes to describe the language skills of European citizens. The 25 European Union member states have called for the establishment of a *European Indicator of Language Competence* on the basis of the CEFR (COM, 2005: 7). The purpose of the indicator is to measure overall foreign language competences in each member state. It is intended to have high levels of accuracy and reliability, with political acceptance to follow. The objective is to provide European Union member states with hard data on which any necessary adjustment in their approach to foreign language teaching and learning can be based.

4.1 Try to evaluate Chinese English skill by CEFR and ELP

The European Language Portfolio (ELP), based on the CEFR, uses its communicative and actional approach making the Common Reference Levels available for language testing, language planning and reporting on language proficiency. It is possible to compare the (English) language proficiencies of individuals and groups in Europe and China: learners, teachers, examiners, administrators, policy makers, educational institutions can refer their efforts to the CEFR. In order to facilitate co-operation between in Europe and China and to provide a basis for the recognition of language qualifications can provide a basis for the acknowledgement of the (English) language qualifications that are used in the different European countries. In order to promote the international level of foreign language Education in china we can try to evaluate the chinese English skill by CEFR and ELP. The CEFR might also be used in the planning of English learning programs (e.g., for establishing interfaces between different sectors of education, for developing curriculum guidelines and textbooks or for teacher training). The scales of illustrative descriptors can be used in the support of self-directed language learning (e.g., raising self-awareness of own language skills and strategic actions to be taken by the learner).

4.2 Develop the plurilingualism and pluriculturalism of the foreign language education

As a consequence of socio-economically or politically determined processes of migration and traditional patterns of language use and language learning change considerably in Europe. More than 800 million Europeans provide a large variety of different cultural and language backgrounds. The CEFR is a reference document that makes it possible to compare the language proficiencies of individuals/groups. But its objectives go further than this. The CEFR indicates how a language is acquired, taught, learnt and can be assessed. Promoting consciousness of and reflection on the use of language are two other important objectives. The members of a family in Europe can use different languages. In Holland the parents often talk with their children by Dutch, English and German. And in Switzerland it is normal that family members speak each other by Germany, French, Italian and English at the same time. In china the people use mainly mandarin in school and other situations. Further more the people of some places speak each other by dialect. Therefore it is very necessary to develop the plurilingualism and pluriculturalism of the foreign language education.

4.3 Enlarge the surroundings of foreign language learning

The aim of the construction of the CEFR was to promote transparency and coherence for language

learning and using in a comprehensive way when people learn languages in formal as well as in informal contexts. The European can master several foreign languages for life need. For example in Swiss if some students from Italian district go to Zurich University, they must learn Germany well for learning and life in Zurich, in Germany district. But in china the people speak mandarin everywhere, so they need not study foreign languages for life and for practice. Learning foreign language is almost for school test. We must learn from CEFR and ELP that Chinese must use the foreign languages in real life time, e.g. at home, or at work. Foreign language learning not only occurs at school.

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